

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-27NEW YORK TIMES
9 November 1985

The Spy Who Ate Unsafely

OBSERVER | Russell Baker

When the world's great spy agencies get their hands on a rival spy, the first thing they do is take him to a safe house. So naturally when C., the boss of the C.I.A., was told that Vitaly Yurchenko of the K.G.B. had defected, his first words were:

"Take Yurchenko to a safe house immediately."

I have it on excellent authority — the safe house's next-door neighbors, if you must know — that the safe house chosen to house Yurchenko safely is in Virginia. Its next-door neighbors, who asked not to be identified by name lest factual precision dispel the murkiness essential to a good spy story, groaned when the C.I.A. pulled into the driveway with Yurchenko.

The neighborhood had been going steadily downhill for months because of the safe house. "You don't see the better class of people coming and

going over there," said a local master of hounds.

"Mostly it's men wearing those off-the-rack cement-colored suits favored by C.I.A. people," he said. "Or else it's Russians, and you know what condition they arrive in."

"Heavily drugged with American truth serums," I suggested.

"No," he said. "Heavily clothed in those square-cut baggy suits that look like they must be made in a slave suit factory in Siberia."

"So the average tenant at the safe house doesn't look much like your typical Virginia squire?"

"It's rare to see one you'd want to chase a fox with," he said.

So when the C.I.A. group arrived with Yurchenko the neighbors groaned, and those with prospective buyers inspecting their houses at the moment groaned loudest of all.

A prospective buyer who can be iden-

tified only as B. was inspecting the saddling room of the house opposite the safe house when he heard the owner groan "as though in deep agony."

Following the owner's distressed gaze, B. looked and saw "this stunning figure of a man — splendid moustache, beautifully cut suit, elegant shirt with French cuffs, beautiful necktie — a fellow apparently tailored in London, Rome and Paris — being escorted into a house across the street by a group of men wearing off-the-rack cement-colored suits."

B. thought it must be the Governor, a senator or a kingpin of the cocaine trade and would have instantly bought the house he was inspecting if the owner hadn't blurted:

"You don't have to worry about the C.I.A. making a lot of noise over there. Half the time the house sits empty."

"Are you telling me that's a safe

house?" asked B., who was already living next door to a safe house in Maryland, owned a summer home across the street from a summer safe house in Pennsylvania, and was sick and tired of men wearing badly cut suits, half of whom spoke in Russian accents.

Those who saw Yurchenko's TV appearance from the Soviet Embassy now realize that the vision of sartorial elegance B. saw was, in fact, the K.G.B. defector who was destined to

delight the world's Scrabble players by validating the word "redefector."

What happened in that Virginia safe house seems clear. Yurchenko, surrounded day and night by men wearing off-the-rack cement-colored suits, became appalled by the drabness of American tailoring and concluded that he had made a dreadful mistake.

We next discover him in Washington. Unless you are trying to obtain a huge sum of money to squander, there is very little to do in Washington. One gets bored quickly. Eating helps fight boredom.

So naturally when C., boss of the C.I.A., was told that Yurchenko was hungry, he said "Take him to a safe restaurant."

Two minutes later a certain C.I.A. executive whose title is too long to print in this limited space lifted a ringing telephone and remembered what he had forgotten to do.

"Yurchenko wants to chow down," his caller was saying. "Where is the safe restaurant?"

Where indeed? Three years ago this executive had received a memo saying, "Set up network of safe restaurants soonest." He had been distracted. First by that tedious job of setting up a chain of safe drugstores supplying safe toothpaste, safe dental floss, safe mouthwash, the whole safe rigmarole. Then, secretly opening all those safe haberdasheries with the safe off-the-rack suits. . . .

"I'll get back to you," he told the caller.

"I am starving," moaned Yurchenko hours later. What kind of agent would let a defector starve to death? And so it was a snap for Yurchenko to walk out of an unsafe restaurant. He is now back in Moscow ordering new neckties from a K.G.B. safe haberdasher in Minsk. □